

The Heart of Our Faith

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on February 24, 2019
based on Luke 6:27-38*

Starting out, I think it would be helpful for us to remind ourselves, in hearing today's difficult gospel lesson, that nobody is born a Christian. Jesus's teaching here is not common sense, or conventional wisdom. There is nothing innate about his understanding of this faith, as Soren Kierkegaard is remembered to have said. I mean, who loves their enemies? Who does good to those who hate them? If someone slaps us on the cheek, who among us offers the other?

This is crazy talk.

I have a friend, David Augsberger, who has made it his life to study and write about forgiveness. He was once speaking on the topic at Notre Dame University. During the Q & A following his lecture a nun, wearing a full habit, came to the microphone provided and asked, "Does your theology of forgiveness mean that the Irish are expected to forgive the British?"

David Augsberger said, "Why, yes."

And the nun said, "Never!" End of argument.

From time to time I am asked about whether or not we should say creeds here at Wasatch as part of worship. People here are of differing opinions on the topic.

Well, we *do* say a creed every time we have communion. We call it, "The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving," and it takes several forms. "Why then," some have asked, "don't we say The Apostles' Creed?" It's pretty universal.

Let me will tell you why. The answer is simple. The Apostles' Creed leaves out all the teachings of Jesus. Every one of them. Here is how some have put the problem. The place for the teachings of Jesus in the Apostles' Creed is held by a comma – it's the comma between "born of the Virgin Mary" [comma] and ... "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Do you see? Jesus' whole life is left out, as if the only important thing is that he was born, and that he died.

That amounts to "Christianity-lite," to me, especially when it comes to this morning's text. It leaves out the hard stuff. It says to Christians, pay no attention to what the man Jesus said. Just believe he died for your sins and live however the heck you want.

In essence, it apologizes for his teachings – because, frankly, it's embarrassed by them. A lot of Christians are.

Many years ago Ted Turner, the billionaire entrepreneur, said “Christianity is a religion for losers.” Well, Ted has softened since then and he has done an awful lot of good with his money, so I don’t want to be hard in him, but it is texts like this morning’s that lead people to say such things – lead people to ignore Jesus’s teachings – wish he’d never said this stuff about loving our enemies.

I know of no more difficult words of Jesus, particularly for us losers who live in a world of winners. Of course, much here depends on your definition of winning. I mean, you have to ask, what is the goal of the game of life?

I imagine Jesus has a different goal in mind than Ted Turner has.

Defending his ethics, Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you.” Anybody can love someone who loves them. If you return good when good is due, what is special about that? Nothing. He’s endorsing a way of living that is a narrow way; a road that is rarely traveled.

I mean, everyone plays the game of retribution, right? It’s the Old Testament game of “an eye for an eye.”

In playing by the rules of “an eye for an eye” it’s easy to be a winner. You just take the opportunity to put the other guys eye out once he’s poked out yours. Except that, as Jesus observed, everybody who plays that game actually loses in the end. In such a world, everyone eventually goes blind.

But, oddly enough, there is another way – a loser’s way, according to the Ted Turners of this world. Not every person on the planet chooses to play by these Old Testament rules. The vast majority do, but some people realize that there are no real winners in that game.

Some years ago I remember a story of a young man who was working in the family grocery – minding the store, so to speak, while his mom was at church, and he was shot to death by a man strung out on drugs. A day or so after, a television reporter ask his mother what she would like to see done to the young man who killed her son. What would make for justice, he asked.

“Justice?” she remarked. “Justice is ultimately up to my Lord.” Although my heart wants revenge, I know that ‘vengeance is mine’ saith the Lord. I just pray that someday God will give me the courage to forgive him.”

I was impressed with that word, *courage*. Because it would take courage to come up with whatever one needed to go against our natural inclination to revenge - a supernaturally derived grace that might give one that courage; a courage the world would say was not courage at all – just weakness. Something for losers.

I mean, look, it's not news, is it, when someone takes a gun and shoots another? As people have said in recent days, the real national emergency we face is NOT the one at the border; no, it's the epidemic of gun violence in this country. Yes, and when someone stands up and forgives, that's news. That's not the norm. That mother I spoke of was playing a different game and by a whole different set of rules than most people play.

She looked like just any other mother, except that God had given her an extraordinary courage.

I mean, most of us know the world's game, right? We have played it from birth. The winners in that game get to go to the head of the class, to the great universities, the board rooms of the big corporations.

Many of them were born "winners. Their fathers gave them \$250 million dollars right out of the gate. The losers – well, we know where they live -- they are warehoused in nursing homes, foster care, jails, and shelters for the homeless.

It's not pretty. I mean, is that really what Jesus wants? More losers? More people excluded from voting? More children excluded from healthcare. Hasn't there been enough given up by the poor, enough cheek-turning due to domestic violence, for instance? I'm trying to be honest here.

I remember talking to a woman who worked in one such women's shelter. She said most women in shelters go back to their abusive partners seven times before they give up on them. Then she looked at me and she said. "I went back 14 times."

Aren't the smart ones the ones who wake up, buy a gun or hire a lawyer, and get even? Aren't the rules of the game written in the language of social Darwinism, not the gospel?

Well, Jesus has no stake in the production of more losers. There are victims enough without the gospel of Jesus producing more. Abused women shouldn't stay with men who beat them. Never. But look, Jesus *is* inviting us, through these words, to play by the rules of a *different* game and thereby have a chance of winning – really winning in life.

Remember Terry Anderson? He had years of his life ripped away from him by a gang of hooligans. They beat him, brutalized him, stole the best years of his life and family. He had been seized after America bombed the city where he worked as a missionary, Beirut Lebanon – we bombed it into rubble.

This is the way of the world, right? We bomb, they kidnap. We bomb some more.

When Terry was eventually freed he was asked by a reporter, "What would you like the U.S. to do to your captors? Would you like to see them brought to justice?"

There's that world again, justice. Anderson said, "It's not what I would like. I'm a Catholic. As a Christian I've been commanded to forgive."

Now, I ask you, would you call such a man a loser? It depends on the rules you're playing this game of life by, right?

I remember a couple of young people who were on trial for burning a family's new home and their two cars. The family lost everything just because these boys were having a little "fun."

The judge asked the husband and wife what they wanted. Should he throw the book at the boys? They said they saw no good in that. They knew that if the boys went to prison for 6 years or 10 years they'd still get out, they'd still be young, and they wanted the young men to change, not come out of prison hardened and trained in mayhem, and do worse things to other people. So the judge worked it out so the boys got another chance, under strict supervision.

We're those people in that family losers? Some would say so. No, *many* would say so ... particularly in the climate in this country today. We've gotten that far away from Jesus's original teaching.

And many of these people are Christians. They gladly say the Apostle's Creed every Sunday. But then, it leaves out the life Jesus calls us all to lead.

"Love your enemies, do good; lend expecting nothing in return .. and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful."

Jesus' words are an invitation to forsake the game anybody could "win," to play in a more challenging contest.

It is to bet that this world is actually God's world and that God is at work bringing good out of evil. That's the bet Terry Anderson took -- and the mother who lost her son; people willing to play by different rules, partly because they see the futility in playing by the world's stupid rules. The world's stupid rules give you the ugly mess we are dealing with in this country today.

In a book many of us read 40 years ago called, *The Hiding Place*, the Dutch Christian, Corrie ten Boom, tells how she and her sister Betsy were interned at the Nazi camp at Ravensbruck. Betsy died there, and Corrie dreaded the day, after the war, when she might encounter one of their captors.

But because she wrote her book and became, thereby, a very public person, one day in Munich where she was speaking, she recognized a former SS officer who stood guard at the women's showers at Ravensbruck. A man she despised.

He inched forward to where she was greeting well-wishers. He got his turn to speak to her. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, God has washed my sins away."

The man thrust out his hand to her but she could not take it. She felt a particular shame and guilt for that. She said later that she prayed, "Lord Jesus, "forgive me and help me forgive him." But nothing happened. There was no warmth, no forgiveness.

She prayed again. "Jesus, there is no way I can forgive him. It is too much. You must do it."

Struggling within herself she took the step of putting her hand in his, and she said, "the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to emanate from me to him ... It overwhelmed me."

Living by the gospel of Jesus is no picnic.

During the deepest, darkest days of apartheid when the white supremacist government of South African tried to shut down opposition by canceling a political rally, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead.

St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town filled with worshippers. Outside the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching, they brazenly entered the Cathedral, fully armed. This was new and bold and terrifying for those worshipping. The police lined the walls. Some took out notebooks and recorded Tutu's words.

But Bishop Tutu would not be intimidated. He confidently proclaimed that the "evil" and "oppression" of apartheid "would not prevail." And, you know, at that moment, he was probably the only individual on the planet who believed that.

He decided not to ignore the police, but to address them directly. "You are powerful," he said, "You are very powerful, but you are not gods, and I serve a God who will not be mocked."

Then he came out from behind the pulpit. He softened. His classic smile lit up his face.

"So," he said, "since you have already lost, we are inviting you to come and join the winning side."

The place erupted. The police, totally nonplussed, scrambled out the back lest anyone think they had accepted his invitation. Dancing and singing began in earnest throughout the cathedral.

The struggle was not done. No, it was only beginning. There was much to be done to turn losing into winning for the anti-apartheid forces, but, in a sense, the outcome of the struggle was sealed at that moment -- in that cathedral. In a place of worship which had become a field of battle. And the only weapon the "winning" side had was the teachings of Jesus found in this morning's gospel text.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies we are tempted to say, "Well, that doesn't really apply to me. I am so nice to other people that I haven't made any enemies." Come now. Be honest. If you have lived in this world very long, and if you have been required to interact with very many people, you will probably have enemies.

I would even say that the better person you are -- the more you try to live a good and righteous life, the greater the possibility that people will react against you with enmity. Especially in such a time as this with people wearing their racism and hatred as a badge of honor.

That's often the way the world responds to those who take seriously the teachings of Jesus.

*But I say to you **who are willing to hear**: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them.*

This *is* a religion for losers. Proud losers, at that.

Brothers and sisters, the text this morning is not a list of rules and duties. Rather, Jesus's sermon is a picture of life as it was meant to be lived.

We're not being handed an impossible rule book. We are being given a vision of God.

Amen.